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Shakespeare Studies

by

LOCKE RICHARDSON

A New Interpretation

of

Falstaff's Dying Words

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xx Theobaldi is an exordatio
certissima, and no less certain
is your interpretation of it.

Yours faithfully
Augustine Birrell

PR
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DR. WILLIAM J. ROLFE writes :—

I have serious doubts whether this explanation of Falstaff's habit of quoting Scripture, though very ingenious and plausible, is correct. The interpretation of the old sinner's death-bed utterances, however, seems to me by far the best that has ever been suggested, and I shall be surprised if it is not generally approved by Shakespeare scholars and critics.



HAKESPEARE'S characters have a vital and perennial interest, in that they are idealized images of our common human nature.

Hence, like the real people of the world, they have the trick of unconsciously revealing glimpses of their past history : they bear the stamp of other days.

Sir John Falstaff is a shining illustration of this truth. What, for example, is to be gathered as to his past life from his remarkable knowledge of the Bible, of which he makes a more copious use—in literal quotation, in metaphor, and in subtle allusion—than any other of Shakespeare's characters ?

One point is established beyond question, namely, that his youth was passed in a religious atmosphere, probably austere religious; against which, by the way, the reaction of later years was not altogether unnatural.

To be more specific :—

As a boy, Jack Falstaff was, according to his own unconscious testimony, accustomed to the religious observances of a well-ordered home,—grace before meat, and family prayers,—being there taught the nobility of truth-telling and honesty. He was, no doubt, taken regularly to church, probably “creeping like snail, unwillingly”; he was a choir-boy, versed in the Creed and the Catechism; he was well instructed in Christian doctrines and virtues,—the need of repentance; the scheme of salvation; the duty of fasting and prayer; and the certainty of future rewards and punishments,—his præternaturally sensitive and lively imagination being deeply and lastingly impressed by an ever-present vision of the King of Terrors and the fires of Hell.

Although this impression of his character is largely due to unconscious revelation, yet it is amply authorized by the subjoined passages, which are maimed, of course, by being torn from their context. Familiar as we are with the Bible there will be no difficulty in supplying the texts which inspired Falstaff's wit.

Henry the Fourth—

Part I.

“I'll follow, as they say, for reward. He that rewards me, God reward him ! If I do grow great, I'll grow less ; for I'll purge, and leave sack, and live cleanly, as a nobleman should do.”

“No, I'll be sworn, I make as good use of thy face, as many a man doth of a death's-head or a *memento mori*. I never see thy face but I think upon hell-fire, and Dives that lived in purple ; for there he is in his robes, burning, burning. If thou wert any way given to virtue, I would swear by thy face ; my oath should be, ‘By this fire, that's God's angel.’ But thou art altogether given over, and wert indeed, but for the light in thy face, the son of utter darkness.”

“Thou art an everlasting bon-fire-light.”
[Cf. “The primrose path to the everlasting bonfire.”]

“Well, I doubt not but to die a fair death for all this.”

“Dost thou hear, Hal? thou knowest, in the state of innocence Adam fell ; and what should poor Jack Falstaff do in the days of villainy ? Thou seest I have more flesh than another man ; and therefore more frailty.”

“Grace thou wilt have none, not so much as will serve to be prologue to an egg and butter.”

“Well, God give thee the spirit of persuasion, and him the ears of profiting, that what thou speakest may move, and what he hears may be believed.”

"If they speak more or less than truth, they are villains, and the sons of darkness."

"A bad world I say. I would I were a weaver; I could sing psalms or anything."

P. Hen. "Why Thou owest God a death."

Fal. "What need I be so forward with him that calls not on me. Can honour set to a leg? No: or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour? A word. What is that word honour? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. Is it insensible then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it.—Therefore, I'll none of it: honour is a mere scutcheon; and so ends my catechism."

"And now my whole charge consists of slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton's dogs licked his sores; that you would think that I had a hundred and fifty tattered prodigals lately come from swine-keeping, from eating draf^f and husks."

"If to be fat be to be hated, then Pharaoh's lean kine are to be loved."

"If then the tree may be known by the fruit, as the fruit by the tree, then, peremptorily I speak it, there is virtue in that Falstaff."

"This pitch, as ancient writers do report, doth defile."

"Hostess, clap to the doors: watch to-night, pray to-morrow."

P. Hen. "Now, my masters, for a true face, and good conscience."

Fal. "Both which I have had ; but their date is out."

Henry the Fourth—

Part II.

"For my voice, I have lost it with hallooing, and singing of anthems."

"His face is Lucifer's privy-kitchen, where he doth nothing but roast malt-worms. For the boy,—there is a good angel about him, but the devil outbids him too."

"Let him be damned, like the glutton ! pray God his tongue be hotter."

"Thy mother's son ! like enough ; and thy father's shadow : so the son of the female is the shadow of the male : it is often so, indeed ; but not of the father's substance."

"Lord, Lord, how subject we old men are to this vice of lying !"

"I am as poor as Job, my lord, but not so patient."

The Merry Wives of Windsor.

"I never prospered since I foreswore myself at primero. Well, if my wind were but long enough to say my prayers, I would repent."

* * * "think'st thou I'll endanger my soul gratis ? * * * I myself sometimes, leaving

the fear of Heaven on the left hand, and hiding mine honour in my necessity, am fain to shuffle, to hedge."

"Why, now is Cupid a child of conscience ; he makes restitution.

"I fear not Goliath with a weaver's beam ; because I know also, life is a shuttle."

"I think the devil will not have me damned, lest the oil that's in me should set hell on fire ; he would never else cross me thus."

A man, who habitually jokes about hell-fire, does so either as a shallow scoffer, or in a nervous effort to appear indifferent to a haunting dread, the latter being the case with Falstaff, who never scoffs. Throughout his brilliant and audacious treatment of the tragedy of life and death, Sir John continually betrays a shuddering anxiety as to his exit from this world and the safety of his soul thereafter.

He can flout at Goliath with a weaver's beam, but quails before the terrors of the unseen world. This is really the only vulnerable point in all his moral and intellectual equipment—the Achilles heel at which alone his boon companions can aim their shafts of ridicule with any hope of wounding to the quick. This is the only kind of banter,

moreover, be it observed, to which Sir John makes no repartee, witness the following scene, viz.:

Henry the Fourth—

Part I. Act 1. Scene 2.

Fal. “But, Hal, I pr'ythee, trouble me no more with vanity. I would to God thou and I knew where a commodity of good names were to be bought. An old lord of the council rated me the other day in the street about you, sir,—but I marked him not; and yet he talked wisely, and in the street too.”

P. Hen. “Thou didst well; for wisdom cries out in the streets, and no man regards it.”

Fal. “O, thou hast damnable iteration,* and art, indeed, able to corrupt a saint. Thou hast done much harm upon me, Hal,—God forgive thee for it. Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing; and now am I, if a man should speak, truly, little better than one of the wicked. I must give over this life, and I will give it over; I'll be damned for never a king's son in Christendom.”

P. Hen. “Where shall we take a purse to-morrow, Jack?”

Fal. “'Zounds, where thou wilt, lad, I'll make one.”

P. Hen. “I see a good amendment of life in thee,—from praying to purse-taking.”

* A wicked trick of repeating and applying holy texts (Johnson).

Enter Poins, at a distance.

Fal. “Why, Hal, 'tis my vocation, Hal ; 'tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation.—Poins !—O, if men were to be saved by merit, what hole in hell were hot enough for him ? This is the most omnipotent villain, that ever cried, ‘Stand !’ to a true man.”

P. Hen. “Good Morrow, Ned.”

Poins. “Good Morrow, sweet Hal.—What says Monsieur Remorse? What says Sir John Sack-and-Sugar? Jack, how agrees the devil and thee about thy soul that thou soldest him on Good Friday last for a cup of Madeira and a cold capon's leg ?”

P. Hen. “Sir John stands to his word,—the devil shall have his bargain ; for he was never yet a breaker of proverbs,—he will give the devil his due.”

Poins. “Then art thou damned for keeping thy word with the devil.”

P. Hen. “Else he had been damned for cozening the devil.”

The cause of Sir John's failure to make response to this pitiless attack has been hinted at above, as well as his serio-comic effort to ward off and to postpone all harrowing and depressing thoughts, as in the extracts which follow, viz. :

Henry the Fourth—

Part I. Act 3. Scene 3.

Fal. “Bardolph, am I not fallen away vilely since this last action? do I not bate? do I not dwindle? Why, my skin hangs about me like an old lady’s loose gown: I am withered like an old apple-john. Well, I’ll repent, and that suddenly, while I am in some liking; I shall be out of heart shortly, and then I shall have no strength to repent. An I have not forgotten what the inside of a church is made of, I am a peppercorn, a brewer’s horse: the inside of a church!* Company, villainous company, hath been the spoil of me.”

Bard. “Sir John, you are so fretful, you cannot live long.”

Fal. “Why, there is it:—come sing me a song; make me merry. I was as virtuously given as a gentleman need to be; virtuous enough: swore little; diced not above seven times a week; paid money that I borrowed—three or four times; lived well, and in good compass: and now I live out of all order, out of all compass.”

Henry the Fourth—

Part II. Act 2. Scene 4.

Doll. “When wilt thou leave fighting o’ days and foining o’ nights, and begin to patch up thine old body for heaven?”

*The actor who should give appropriate utterance to this phrase would produce an effect of moving pathos.

Fal. “Peace, good Doll ! do not speak like a death’s head ; do not bid me remember mine end.”

It is at the same vulnerable spot that, later on, the king delivers, with cruel directness, the blow which “kills Falstaff’s heart”—and ends his life.

K. Hen. “I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers ; how ill white hairs become a fool and jester !”

To the superficial observer, Falstaff sees “nothing serious in mortality”—life is a roaring farce, and, when he comes to make his exit from the world, it will doubtless be with a monumental jest upon his lips, like Mercutio, whose ruling passion is strong in death.

The master-mind of Shakespeare, however, which sees the end from the beginning, reveals to the closer student, as I have hinted, that there will be no dazzling flashes of wit at Falstaff’s death-bed ; but that his end will be a consistent termination of his life, profoundly tragic: nor is this revelation in anywise falsified by the humour of Sir John’s remark, during his last illness, about

the flea upon Bardolph's nose—an utterance made half involuntarily, from old habit of the mind—a grim and hollow reverberation of an old time jest, fuller of anguish than of mirth, and showing Shakespeare's masterhand in that, like the Porter's speech in Macbeth, it serves but to deepen the impending gloom.

His early training in orthodox belief, which haunts him through life; the prickings of conscience, traceable throughout his futile and vicious career; his keen and poetic imagination; the shrinking of his adipose bulk from the idea of literal contact with flame; his evident intention some day to turn over a new leaf and “patch up his old body for Heaven,”—all are intimations to the thoughtful mind that, with his latest breath,—if not before,—Falstaff will endeavor to make his peace with God. This, indeed, is found to be the fact from Mistress Quickly’s description of his death.

Henry the Fifth—

Act 2. Scene 3.

Pist. “Falstaff he is dead. And we must yearn therefore.”

Bard. "Would I were with him, where-some'er he is, either in heaven or in hell!"

Host. "Nay, sure, he's not in hell : he's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. 'A made a finer end, and went away an it had been any christom child ; 'a parted even just between twelve and one, even at the turning o' the tide : for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers,* and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way ; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and '*a babbled of green fields.*' † 'How now, Sir John !' quoth I : 'what, man ! be o' good cheer.' So 'a cried out 'God, God, God ! three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God ; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So 'a bade me lay more clothes on his feet : I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone ; then I felt to his knees, and they were as cold as any stone."

Nym. "They say he cried out of sack."

Host. "Ay, that 'a did."

Bard. "And of women."

Host. "Nay, that 'a did not."

* "It is not impossible that there is here an absorption of the definite article in the final sound of *th* in 'with,' whereof we have so many instances in Shakespeare. This absorption is in one instance indicated in the folio by an apostrophe : *with*'. Thus here the full phrase may have been 'play with [the] flowers,' and these flowers may have been either some real flowers which Falstaff had near him, or they may have been the figured flowers on the counterpane."—H. H. FURNESS.

† The folio has "a Table of green fields," emended by Theobald to "'a babbled," which White calls "the most felicitous conjectural emendation ever made of Shakespeare's text."

Boy. “Yes, that 'a did.” “'A said once, the devil would have him about women. Do you not remember, 'a saw a flea stick upon Bardolph's nose, and 'a said it was a black soul burning in hell-fire ?”

“And 'a babbled of green fields.”

I now venture to make known an original interpretation, which, I trust, all lovers of Shakespeare in general, and of dear old Jack Falstaff in particular, will find to be a consistent and poetic explanation of the belaboured passage, “'A babbled of green fields.”

Starting with the premises outlined above, no prediction can be more safe and natural than that Falstaff, when he comes to die, of all men in or out of books, will follow the custom,—honored from time immemorial by “miserable sinners,” on finding themselves face to face with their last enemy,—of either repeating or of hearing repeated some favorite passage of Scripture.

With this conviction, like an astronomer who eagerly scans the heavens for a star whose existence is necessary to account for apparent vagaries in a visible system, I read and re-read Mistress

Quickly's quaint, pathetic description of Falstaff's death, in search of a hint that would answer my expectation.

When, at last, I bethought me of the XXIIId Psalm, and of the countless death-beds comforted by its sweet, uplifting eloquence, it flashed upon me that in the phrase, "and 'a babbled of green fields," lurked the very fulfilment of my conviction, that the dear old sinner, who never "had strength to repent," was now, in his mortal extremity, mustering his waning powers in an effort "to die a fair death" by repeating, in broken and half audible accents, verses learned in childhood :

"The Lord is my shepherd ; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures : he leadeth me beside the still waters. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

Here at last we discover the true explanation of Mistress Quickly's words. In her "green fields" we recognize the "green pastures" of David, and with the recognition comes a strain of pathos in Falstaff's dying hour which no hand but Shakespeare's could have infused. Moreover,

may we not here detect another Shakespearian touch, in thus making Mistress Quickly misunderstand and misquote Falstaff's words? Even at the last moment there is an intimation of the social difference in rank and intelligence between Sir John and the low-born hostess of a tavern.

If my interpretation be accepted, many an emendation is brushed aside. The last Cambridge edition records the following substitutes which have been proposed for "'a babbled of green fields ;"—"upon a table of green fells ;" "on a table of green frieze ;" "as stubble on shorn fields ;" "on a table of greasy fell ;" "and the bill of a green finch."

I take pride in announcing that my interpretation has been heartily endorsed by my friend, Horace Howard Furness, whose letter to me upon the subject, though not written for publication, I have the writer's kind permission to print.

LOCKE RICHARDSON.

"The Players," Gramercy Park,
New York, Nov., 1896.

WALLINGFORD,
DELAWARE COUNTY, PENN.

MY DEAR LOCKE RICHARDSON :

I am off to-morrow, and am pressed for time, but I cannot go without telling you how very good I think your "discovery" is about Falstaff's "green fields." It is admirable. The poor old fellow's attempt in the valley of the shadow of death to repeat the psalm which he must have been familiar with when he lost his voice singing of anthems, is very pathetic and is exactly needed to complete the picture of him.

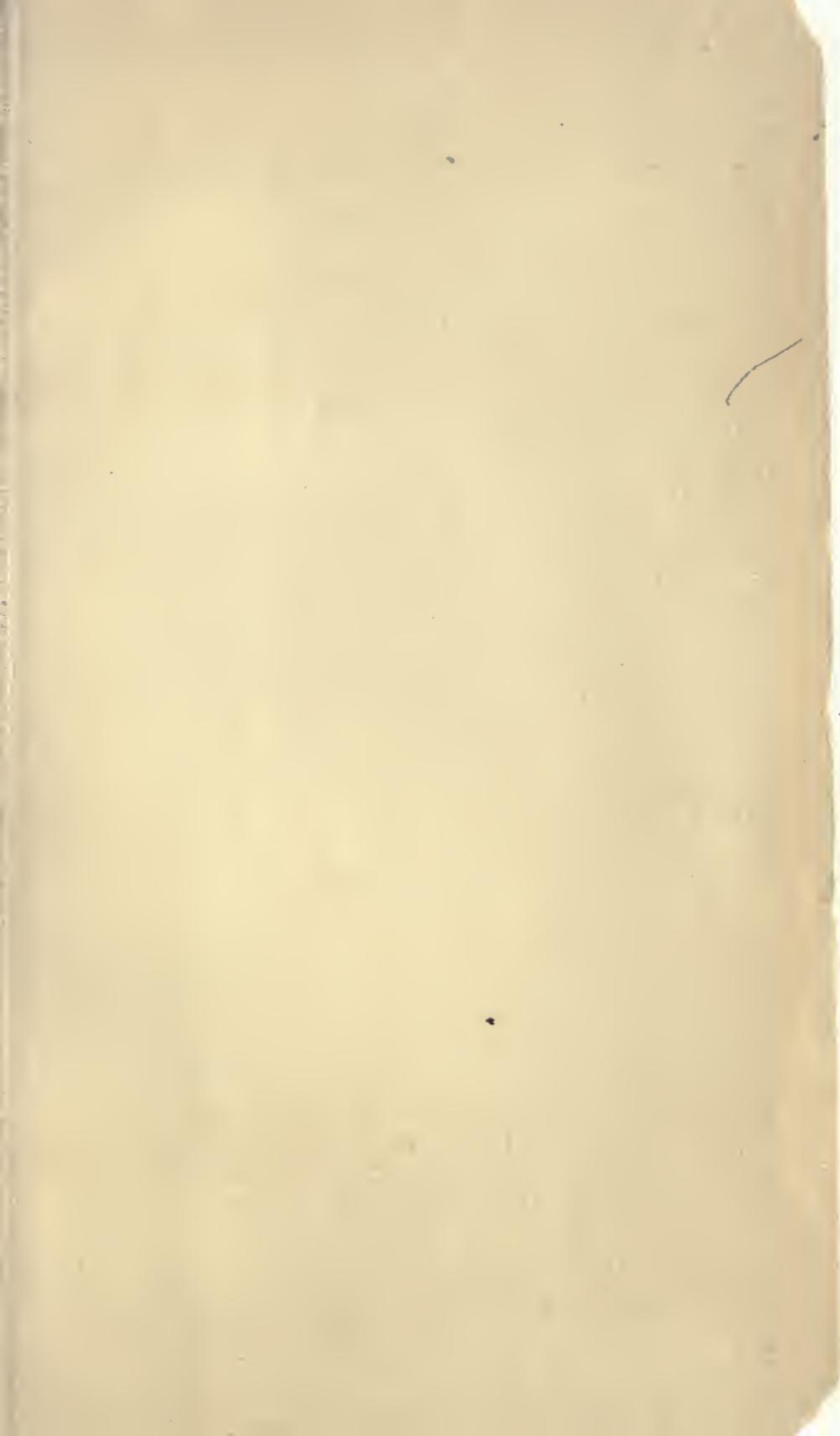
I now discover that I never liked the idea of his mind wandering to the innocence of childhood, and it does not in the least harmonize with his invocation of "God!"

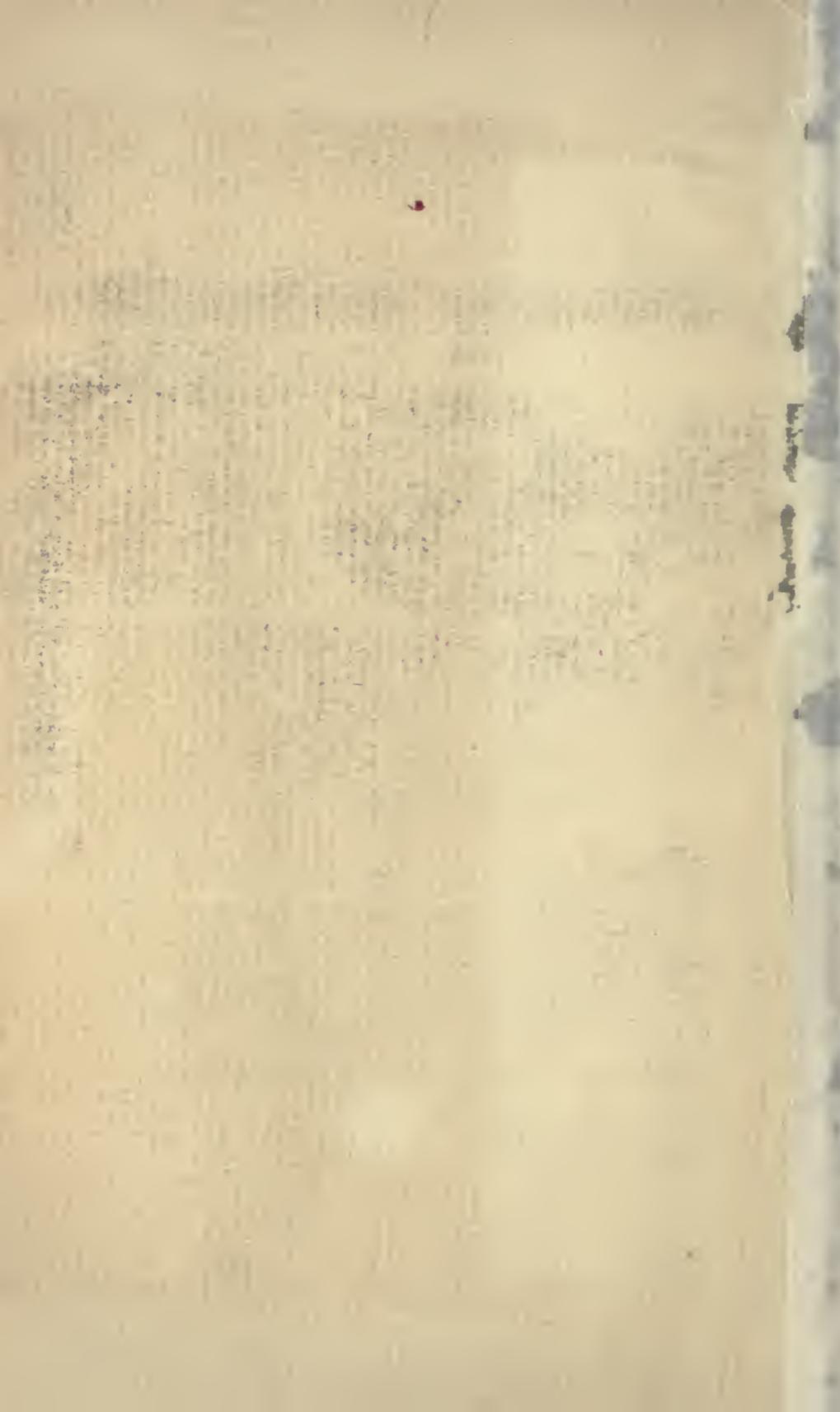
You must remember that the conversion of "Table" into *babbled* is Theobald's work, and not Shakespeare's, as far as mere text goes.

But hang texts, Theobald's is an *emendatio certissima*, and no less certain is your interpretation of it, the which, if I had lit on, I should be as proud as forty peacocks. I congratulate you most heartily. I have adopted it from this hour, and shall always blow a vigorous blast in your honor when I refer to it.

Believe me, yours faithfully,

HORACE HOWARD FURNESS.





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